11-2009

What shapes the way in which we imagine our world?

Knowledge@SMU

(http://knowledge.smu.edu.sg)

What shapes the way in which we imagine our world?

Published: November 30, 2009 in Knowledge@SMU

Environmental degradation, flu epidemics, nuclear safety, migration, trafficking - these are some of the issues that have shaped our consciousness and the way in which we see the world. Such contemporary global imaginations can be summed up into three broad words: "earthy", "funky" and "wordy", says Xiang Biao, a RCUK (Research Council United Kingdom) academic fellow at the University of Oxford.

Put simply, issues to do with energy, depletion of resources and pollution are rooted in nature, and hence, about the *earth*. Colourful social movements, especially those of the anti-globalisation and environmental variety, can be characterised as *funky*, insofar that such movements tend to be visually-rich, emotionally-charged, dramaturgical, and at times, mischievous. And in making sense of current global conditions, academics are *wordy*, especially when they are reluctant to provide simple and straightforward explanations.

Explaining these concepts at SMU's Social Sciences & Humanities Seminar Series (http://www.socsc.smu.edu.sg/events/seminar_series/social_sciences_2009.asp), Xiang argued that it is important for us to reflect upon the foundations of our global imaginations, or rather, the way in which we understand our world. But in order to understand why certain imaginations have become more prevalent than others, we need to make sense of the complex relations between global cultural processes; of how "ideas, images and meanings revolve around the political economy of material production".

Today, discourse on the global political economy relies heavily on western philosophies. But, as Asia's economic giants rise on the global stage, is the "gravity" shifting to the East? Xiang thinks not.

He raised the example of Nike, which has suppliers and manufacturers peppered across Asia. In spite of this, Nike's power – those factors that endear the company to its customers and other admirers – lies very much in its brand. "The symbolic value originates in the West, and because of this, the financial value (profit) returns to the West." So while Asia may be the centre of industrialisation for a good number of Western branded goods and services, Asia is not where cultural power resides.

"There is a disjuncture between political-economic power and symbolic cultural power," Xiang observed. So for Asia to drive social changes globally, we must be mindful of the global contestations of ideas. And it is precisely for this reason that he has chosen to examine western conceptions of the world - to understand why contemporary imaginations have become "earthy", "funky" and "wordy", and finally how alternative global imaginations may develop.

Looking back to look forward

Up till around the 19th century, global imaginations were directly tied to higher spiritual pursuits. Citing Michel-Rolph Trouillot (http://www.amazon.com/Global-Transformations-Anthropology-Modern-World/dp/0312295219/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1259223087&sr=8-2), Xiang contended that the focus has now shifted to physical survival – how to live, how to give future generations decent air conditions, how to ensure that they will have enough resources to survive.

This emphasis on survival is important in the formulation of global perceptions today, especially in terms of how world views have shifted through five main phases in history:

1. During the pre-modern era, cosmology formed the basis to which humans understood the world and society. During this period, human beings thought of themselves as being at the centre of the universe.

2. The Copernican revolution changed perceptions of the universe, as the earth was recognised as merely one planet within a larger solar system. This led to the understanding of the earth's physicality, as evidenced from the cultural and aesthetic fashion at the time – the globe. People were so fixated with the globe, in fact, that it became a common object of decoration in homes, offices and other spaces. But more importantly, people realised that the universe was far bigger than they had previously thought, and human beings were not at the centre of it all.

3. Not only did this physical sense of "globality" intensify in the later modern era, it also gave rise to deeper social meanings. Western colonialism extended western civilisation and norms to many parts of the world. In response, revolutionary ideologies inspired by the likes of anarchism and Marxism became symbols of liberation and

emancipation. "Colonial imperialism" and "progressive internationalism" co-existed as the world became an arena of struggle.

4. Post World War II, nationalism dominated global imaginations as the world saw itself in terms of separate nation-states with clear-cut boundaries, divided both politically and economically. The establishment of the nation-state was seen to be crucial during this period, as it was viewed as the only way a country could be legitimately recognised by the rest of the world. Yet, global imaginations became split along two main axes: East versus West (communism versus capitalism) and North versus South (developed versus developing). Xiang noted that Mao Zedong's "three world theory" combines these two dimensions.

5. The year of 1989, Xiang said, could be seen as the "end of history" insofar that it marked the emergence of a single hegemonic ideology and a dominant imagination of the future – that humans will be ruled according to the logic of free market, democracy and human rights. Homogenising and promising as it may have seemed, a dystopian view of the world also emerged, as environmental degradation inflamed fears of a global implosion – the end of life. This fear shifted the *sine qua non* of how people thought about mortality and morality.

Down to earthiness

"While the world was deeply divided during the cold war, it gained a sense of "inevitable interconnectedness" following the fall of the Berlin wall," Xiang noted. However, people realised the inadequacies of politics in addressing some of the world's biggest worries. No single actor can 'take the blame' for concerns, such as the depletion of fossil fuels, disease, human suffering and global warming. At the same time, no single actor can fix these problems.

"Everyone is suffering. Everyone is responsible. This is very different from earlier political struggles where targets [to point the finger at] were very clear. Nowadays, it's very difficult to find any single party to protest against [for all of these global worries]; so we start with ourselves first," Xiang explained.

In light of this, the question of "who are we" becomes more important than the question of "which political or ideological camp we belong to". So we return to our primordial identities to make sense of life. The revival of ethnic and religious identities in many parts of the world after the cold war is a manifestation of this, he said.

Take for example, the way in which we view human rights today: "If you look at today's human rights debate, what I find interesting, as a Chinese, is to look at the European and American Christian understanding of abortion… [Some people argue that] if a baby is growing inside [a human body], you should not abort it. But in Asia, particularly China, a baby is regarded as embedded within a network of social relations. If a woman finds out that she is pregnant but not as a result of genuine love, for example, she may decide to abort. And that would not be regarded as an exercise in [feminist] power."

Flower power

As the world connected over shared concerns, "funky" social movements sprouted globally, fuelled by an anarchistic "direct action", "do-it-yourself" ideology; in response to beliefs that bureaucracies are incapable of solving problems. Here, Xiang clarified that he does not take "funky" to mean 'flaky' or 'flamboyance', but rather, 'quirky' and 'colourful'. "Funky" also describes such movements' mobilisation strategy.

Greenpeace can be seen as a quintessential "funky" movement, in Xiang's opinion, as they have been quite successful at tapping into a very important and new "weapon" – the power of the image. For instance, instead of sitting in small boats to save whales from whalers, Greenpeace would film the incident, disseminate the content, and create a following around that incident. Here, the strategy is to build an image and then to create an aura around it.

Funky movements tend to be global in scope, Xiang observed, as images acquire their power through wide circulations. These movements take place across many places all at once, usually in the US, Europe and Asia, or "wherever the IMF or World Bank summit goes". They also tend to be provocative - visual spectacles, through the use of potent imagery and colourful slogans. Some have referred to such displays as "carnivals against capitalism".

However, he noted that many of these movements have stopped short of providing explicit solutions. Case in point: activists have taken to the streets to protest against intangibles like neo-liberalism, consumerism, materialism, etc – substantial causes, no doubt, but perhaps flimsy. "They are extremely powerful and emotional, and they are extremely energising. But they are hardly concrete when it comes down to giving solutions, policy suggestions, and so on," he said.

"From a classical point of view, these [social movements] are not political, but rather, performances or experiments. People know that it is temporary. But it is very powerful and extremely energising for individuals who participate… That is why social movements are so popular and mobilising," he added.

A wordy world

"Why have some academic writings become wordy in recent years; so full of complicated words without clear

assessments of the reality?" Xiang asked.

His theory is that there is a general epistemological willingness to surrender oneself to complexity, as scholars increasingly see the world to be largely unstructured and unpredictable - where rules, patterns and logic are no longer reliable precepts – so they surrender themselves in the intellectual or philosophical abyss; unwilling to establish causal relationships based on clear logic.

Xiang pointed out that ancient philosophies were mainly concerned with differentiating between what was good and bad – what we should do versus what we should not do. In modern times, however, social thought has become increasingly "geometric". Equilibrium in economics is an example of this sort of geometrical thinking.

"There is a demand and a supply, and the free market works out a balance by itself," he explained. "There is no substantive judgment or deeper meaning behind such developments. In liberal politics, geometrical thinking would be about letting every voice talk and trusting that it will eventually balance out."

Xiang believes that geometrical thinking, in part, contributes to the "wordiness" because in this condition, people choose not to make substantive judgments or assessments on social life and issues. Instead, they would only study contestations, interceptions and negotiations – and this is as far and deep as it goes.

The wordiness in the social sciences is also fed by a culture of citations and "inter-textuality" – the establishment of relationships between texts followed by the planting of more text into an ocean of text. Xiang admits that he probably takes a more cynical view in this respect, borne out of a personal worry that such wordiness will be quite "suffocating" for future generations of thinkers and scholars.

Nevertheless, he acknowledges that "earthy", "funky" and "wordy" are simply broad frames from which we may appreciate the present state of social consciousness. So even though these three labels may not be fully representative of dominant global imaginations, they offer common perspectives from which world leaders may come together.

"The earthy, for example, is about an unprecedented importance given to the physical existence of our natural environment in formulating our dialogue… For instance, climate change is one of the few topics that people can talk about, despite their differences. So with these three words, I tried to identify the strategic sites upon which different forces of the world could come together," he explained.

And these strategic sites, Xiang argues, will set the stage for debates that will ultimately shape our world.

Share on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/share.php?u=http://knowledge.smu.edu.sg/article.cfm?articleid=1257)

back to top (#top)

back to top (#top)